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Radical plan to save millions from Aids

Antiretrovirals mooted to prevent HIV transmission

CLAIRE KEETON

A BOLD new HIV-Aids prevention model might use antiretroviral drugs to prevent the spread of the virus.

Until now antiretrovirals have been used to treat people who already have HIV, but a new World Health Organisation model shows that the life-extending drugs could well be used to prevent transmission of the virus.

Described by one specialist as “the most exciting new idea in prevention”, the model presented by Reuben Granich of the WHO seized the attention of the world’s scientists at the International Aids Society conference in Cape Town yesterday.

A major factor in the transmission of HIV is the viral load of the HIV-positive individual.

Granich argued that, because antiretrovirals can lower an HIV-positive person’s viral load to undetectable levels, the drugs could be used to make HIV-positive people virtually non-infectious — which could slash HIV transmission rates to levels at which it could eventually be eliminated.

Currently, only people in advanced stages of HIV, with severely compromised immune systems (CD4 counts of 250 and below), are treated with antiretrovirals in the public health system.

The model presented by Granich argues that anybody testing positive for HIV — the model provides for universal voluntary testing and counselling — should be placed on antiretrovirals immediately.

South Africa has more people living with Aids than any other country: 11% of the adult population is infected.

The model presented by Granich could cut new infections and deaths to less than one case per 1 000 people a year by 2016. In 50 years it could reduce the HIV prevalence rate to less than 1%.

Dr Francois Venter, president of the HIV Clinicians’ Society of Southern Africa, said: “This is a major new theme and is leading to intense debate. It offers a convenient convergence of individual and public health benefits. A rough costing demonstrates it is affordable.”

More than seven million deaths could be averted by 2050 by implementing this model in combination with other prevention interventions, said Granich.

“In November [WHO] stakeholders are meeting to discuss this technical model and a

LADY JUSTICE



AIMING HIGH: Haseena Mayat after her appearance before the Judicial Service Commission, which is interviewing candidates for judgeships
● See Page 5
Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

pathway on how to move forward. What is clear is that prevention is crucial and we are not keeping up with treatment demands,” Granich said.

WHO researchers first raised the concept in a paper published in the *Lancet* medical journal late last year. The Cape Town gathering is the first big conference to debate it.

Dr Julio Montaner, president of the International Aids Society, supported the new model and said it had “moved the goalposts far out” from the 2001 goal of universal access to treatment.

Dr Tony Fauci, one of the world’s top HIV

scientists and director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said of the new model: “Immediate treatment is a bold concept that deserves serious consideration. We will be doing research to determine the feasibility of several assumptions underlying it.”

Fauci said they would be researching whether the new model is cost-effective and whether it would work.

“It’s worth pursuing as it has potential at a conceptual level,” he said.

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324 days until the 2010 World Cup in South Africa

Mantashe defends disbanding of provincial committees

S'THEMBISO MSOMI

ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe says the party's decision to disband its North West structure has been vindicated by the violent behaviour of some of the structure's members.

More than 100 ANC members unhappy with the party's decision to disband the provincial executive committee turned violent on Sunday and hurled chairs at Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa and other leaders sent to the province to convey the decision.

An SABC photographer was wounded when the police fired rubber-bullets at the crowd.

Mantashe said the ANC's nation-

al executive committee had decided to replace the provincial committee with a provincial team that would run party structures in North West for the next nine months.

The decision has been condemned by provincial committee members and their supporters, who claim that they are being victimised because they backed former president Thabo Mbeki in his failed bid to prevent Jacob Zuma from becoming party leader in 2007.

But Mantashe defended the ruling party's decision.

"Judging by the behaviour of comrades in the North West following the decision of ... the NEC, we are more than certain we made

a correct decision," said Mantashe.

He said the North West provincial committee, along with its counterpart in Western Cape, had been dissolved because of deep divisions within party structures in both provinces.

Committee dissolved because of divisions in party structures

He said a report compiled by a rapid-response team sent by the national executive committee to investigate the functioning of party structures in North West found:

- Factionalism was negatively impacting on the governance of both the province and municipalities;
- Business interests, control of resources and patronage were at the centre of divisions;
- The ANC could suffer major losses in next year's local government elections unless the situation was addressed.

A similar report on the state of the party in Western Cape, where the ANC surrendered power to the DA during the elections, found:

- The "African and Coloured divide" was a serious problem in ANC structures that needed urgent attention;
- "Good comrades" were marginalised and "blacklisted"

from deployments ;

- Most Cosatu members in the province voted for the DA during the past election.

Mantashe said the ANC's "basic analysis" of the election results showed that the party had remained strong in African townships, but lost a lot of ground in coloured areas to the DA.

"Our own support in coloured areas was cut by half," he said.

He said the task team that would run the province would have strong representation from coloured communities and rural areas.

In the past, these communities felt that they were being overlooked in favour of the Cape Town metro.

ANC ready to rethink

Party to debate nationalisation

S'THEMBISO MSOMI

THE ANC's top leadership has agreed to consider its youth wing's call for the nationalisation of mines but warned that the government would not be duped into bailing out troubled companies.

Party secretary-general Gwede Mantashe yesterday announced that the ANC national executive committee, which met at the weekend, has decided to refer the nationalisation debate to its economic transformation committee which will then develop the party's position on the matter.

"We want to open that debate. What we will resist, however, is the nationalisation of debt where, for an example — because of the financial crisis — people [who] feel indebted, whether they are BEE owners or whoever, think that nationalisation is the quick way of nationalising that debt. That is going to be resisted," Mantashe said.

The Times understands that during the NEC debate on ANC Youth League president Julius Malema's nationalisation call, at least three NEC members — Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande, government policy guru Joel Netshitenzhe and Transport Deputy Minister Jeremy Cronin — cautioned against the "nationalisation" debate being used to force the state to buy out troubled businesses.

Critics of Malema's call within the ruling party argue that the Youth League's "nationalisation" campaign has the backing of BEE groupings within the ruling party whose mining investments are currently in financial troubles.

But Mantashe yesterday refused

to say if the ANC believes that the proponents of nationalisation had ulterior motives.

"I don't talk to suspicion. I am giving you feedback of the analysis that maybe when there is a financial crisis, sometimes people who own [troubled businesses] hope that bail out should constitute nationalisation of debt. We are saying that it should not be.

"We raise that issue because it [nationalisation] was raised within the context of the financial crisis. If it is a policy issue, it should not be linked to the financial crisis, otherwise it is about nationalising debt," he said.

Although the economic transformation committee is now set to consider the matter, the party is unlikely to change its position. The NEC backed Mantashe's recent assertion that public ownership of the country's mineral wealth is already accomplished by the Minerals and Petroleum Development Act.

Mantashe said that the ruling party was forging ahead with plans to introduce national health insurance despite fierce opposition from the private health sector and opposition parties.

He said much of the opposition to the proposed health plan was "ideological" as the ANC has not explained how it would work.

"The reality that is faced by 70% of the country's citizens is that service delivery at all government hospitals will not improve unless medical staff trained in South Africa, and whose training is subsidised by the taxpayer, assume an understanding that it is not only private institutions that should enjoy their expertise," he said.

'What we will resist, however, is the nationalisation of debt'

Merger no solution for provinces

NKULULEKO NCANA

THE merging of the provinces was unlikely to improve service delivery and might make worse the problems of their struggling administrations.

This was the message of Western Cape Premier Helen Zille, speaking at the Wits Management School, Johannesburg, last night.

Zille argued that, though the provinces were not functioning optimally, the reasons given by the ANC for scrapping provincial boundaries would not solve the problems of the ailing provincial governments.

Zille, the leader of the DA, said the belief that the removal of the provinces' boundaries would streamline their government, and reduce costs and improve efficiency, was unfounded. She said there were instances of co-operative governance working well in all three spheres of government.

"Managing preparations for the 2010 World Cup is, by and large, a case in point. The key reason for this is that there was sufficient political will to achieve results, sufficient competence through the appointment of personnel who are 'fit for purpose' to undertake the jobs they are required to do, and accountability to independent structures," Zille said.

She said the ANC's argument that the provinces were a "relic of apartheid" was unfounded and was an "excuse" for centralising power and "to prevent any other party from winning power in another sphere of government".

She said that the ANC, "just like all other liberation movements, confuses power with democracy".



PROVINCIAL PLAYER: DA leader and Western Cape Premier Helen Zille discusses the role and future of the provinces. She was speaking at Wits Management School, Johannesburg, last night
Picture: MOEKETSI MOTICOE

HEAR THE AUDIO
<http://multimedia.thetimes.co.za>

New WHO model could save millions from Aids

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Only about a third of the 9 million people who need treatment receive the life-saving drugs at present.

Paediatric specialist Dr Louise Kuhn said that antiretrovirals worked well to prevent infection among infants and she hoped that "antiretrovirals to prevent sexual

infection among adults would be as effective".

Venter said there were clear benefits to taking antiretrovirals when the CD4 count was higher "but the reality is we largely diagnose people when they are already very sick and most South Africans start with a very low CD4 count".

Nevertheless, he said: "It is the most exciting new idea in pre-

vention on the block. The questions are whether it will work, and increasingly it seems it could."

Granich's model was not the only prevention intervention making waves at the conference.

Yesterday, South Africa launched a clinical trial of the first South African-designed Aids vaccine, which will be tested at five sites locally and in the US.

The US arm of the trial has 12 participants while the South African arm plans to recruit 36 participants from two sites, one in Western Cape and another in Gauteng.

"If data from this clinical trial are promising, we intend to move into the next phase of trials, which will involve about 200 participants, and will look at further

safety and immunogenicity data," said Professor Glenda Gray, lead clinical investigator of the South African clinical trials team.



HAVE YOUR SAY

Should antiretrovirals be cheaper?
tellus@thetimes.co.za
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